

Policy Brief # 13 April 2009



The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform: An Attempt to Foster Regional Accountability

By Burcu Gultekin Punsmann *

Abstract

The August 2008 war in Georgia brought sudden instability and unpredictability in the area immediately beyond Turkey's northeastern border. Turkey has traditionally kept a low profile in the South Caucasus and was concerned with the preservation of the status quo in the region, despite all the divides, blockades and trade restrictions. The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, announced in the context of increasing polarisation and harsh rhetoric, allowed the channels of communication and dialogue with Russia to remain open. The opening towards Armenia, that triggered a new momentum in the normalisation of Turkish – Armenian relations, has brought important credibility to the Caucasus Platform initiative. For the first time, the good Turkish – Russian understanding is being used to solve problems in the common geographical neighbourhood. The Georgian – Ossetian and the Russian – Georgian wars have been a wake-up call for the countries of the region. Hopefully this will lead to regional accountability as the countries of the region have started to assess the costs of the conflicts.

Keywords: Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, Turkish – Russian relations, Turkish – Armenian relations, the Caucasus.

In August 2008, the Georgian – Ossetian and the Russian – Georgian wars took the Turkish government by surprise. They brought sudden instability and unpredictability in the area immediately beyond Turkey's northeastern border. The Turkish – Caucasian border established by the Moscow and Kars treaties of 1921 between the Turkish Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) had remained stable after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Iron Curtain opened the regions on both sides of the Turkish – Georgian border to trade and human interaction and, paradoxically, in 1993, it sealed the Turkish – Armenian border, in the context of the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Turkey has traditionally kept a low profile in the South Caucasus. Turkish diplomatic capability in the region was severely curtailed by the security versus economy trade-off that had been established between Azerbaijan and Turkey. Turkish policy toward the reg-

The views expressed in this Policy Brief are personal and do not necessarily represent those of the ICBSS.

* Dr. Burcu Gultekin Punsmann is Research Associate at the Center for European Studies at the Middle East Technical University in Ankara, and Turkey Project Manager of the Caucasus Business & Development Network run by International Alert.



ion became hostage to security relations with Azerbaijan. Furthermore, an openly pro-Azeri stance on regional issues on the part of Turkey became the cost of the realisation of the Baky – Tbilisi – Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. Turkey was concerned with the preservation of the status quo in the South Caucasus as a means for maintaining regional stability, despite all the divides, blockades and trade restrictions that characterised the area. The weak political will to normalise relations with Armenia illustrates best the problems of this policy: the absence of diplomatic relations with Armenia led to the exclusion of Turkey from the negotiation process for the settlement of the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Turkish isolationist foreign policy, based on the fundamental precept “Peace at Home, Peace in the World” attributed to the founder of the Turkish Republic Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, led to Turkey’s self exclusion from its neighbourhood. The Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 on an anti-expansionism principle. Images of the Turkish troops crossing the Arpacay River and reaching the Caspian Sea on the eve of the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Mudros Truce and the Sèvres Treaty are still fresh in memory. Subsequently, Turkey refrained from involvement in turbulent neighbouring regions, the primary goals of its foreign policy having been throughout the years to strengthen the institution of the state and to preserve territorial integrity and independence. Later on, the context of the Cold War allowed Turkey to forget its geography and history.

However, Atatürk’s diplomacy was far from inward-looking and reactive. The precept “Peace at Home, Peace in the World” actually *ties* world peace to internal stability: internal peace cannot be ensured in the absence of peace in the world. Ensuring peace abroad, especially in the area just beyond Turkey’s borders, becomes a priority. This self-imposed isolation, however, has become costly.

Regarding the August 2008 war, Turkey was concerned with a potential escalation between the Cold War rivals. The idea that it might have to choose between the United States (US) and Russia placed Turkey in a highly uncomfortable position. The cost of the Cold War on Turkey became evident: the old belief that Turkey – one of the flank states – had lost its strategic importance because the Cold War had ended, evaporated for good. As a neighbour to the conflict, Turkey could not remain indifferent. As expressed by Ali Babacan, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Turkey has an enormous stake in overcoming the tensions between Russia and Georgia.¹

The importance of Georgia for Turkey can by no means be underestimated. Developing its relations with Turkey has helped Georgia strengthen its independence. On the other hand, with the closure of the Turkish – Armenian border, Georgia became Turkey’s gateway to the South Caucasus and Central Asia. The BTC pipeline best symbolises this connection. Nevertheless, the Saakashvili government created a sense of uneasiness in Turkey: the over-publicising of any aid received from the US led to an impression of ungratefulness for the support that Georgia received from Turkey. Statements by the President of Georgia expressing his country’s support for Turkey’s accession to the European Union (EU) were received in Turkey with irony and a certain irritation. The reintegration of Adjara following the ousting of Aslan Abashidze in the spring of 2004, led to the de facto abrogation of the autonomous status of the Adjarian Autonomous Republic. The existence of the Adjarian Autonomous Republic is guaranteed by Article 6

¹ Ali Babacan, “Calming the Caucasus”, *International Herald Tribune*, 23 September 2008.



of the Kars Treaty signed in 1921. Although this development generated some discussion in Turkey regarding Turkey's guarantor status over the autonomy of Adjara, Turkey took no steps and raised no vocal criticism on the issue. Turkey had in practical terms no reason to back an autocratic regime like Abashidze's. The successful reintegration of Adjara created a precedent for the Georgian government and explains the first attack against South Ossetia a few months later, in the summer of 2004, which led to the closure of the Egneti market, the exclusion of South Ossetia from the Georgian economic sphere, and the deterioration of Georgian – Russian relations.

The Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform (CSCP), announced in the context of increasing polarisation and harsh rhetoric, allowed the channels of communication and dialogue with Russia to remain open. The announcement was the result of intense Turkish shuttle diplomacy in the region. Although little has been known about the substance of the initiative, Turkey is increasingly perceived as a country that promotes reconciliation and peace. The spontaneous reactions of the countries concerned were surprisingly positive: Baku and Yerevan welcomed the idea enthusiastically. Moscow expressed its support and Tbilisi overcame its first hesitations after direct consultations with Turkey. The scepticism that was expressed focused on the 3+2 format.² It was argued that the format was ill-conceived because of the existing bilateral conflicts: Russia is in conflict with Georgia, Armenia with Azerbaijan and Turkey with Armenia. However, this can be a counter-argument: the need for the CSCP stems very precisely from the existence of these bilateral conflicts. Seeking channels of direct dialogue can only be welcome.

Furthermore, the idea of such a platform could only have been formulated on the basis of the fact that Russia and Turkey are no longer in conflict. These two countries that waged war against each other sixteen times in history, realised that they have no reason to fight. In the 1990s the scene appeared to be set for a revival of the 400-year-old Turkish-Russian competition. The post-Cold War regional context provided the ground for arguments about the "inborn" hostility allegedly existing between the two peoples. Turkey and Russia always had regions over which their interests and claims clashed. Before becoming the frontier between the Republic of Turkey and the USSR in 1921, the Transcaucasus had been the contact zone between the Ottoman and the Russian empires. This contact was all the more violent because for many decades, the two empires had fought rather than traded. The Transcaucasus, standing out as a grey area between two rival political entities and serving as a buffer zone, had been an area of confrontation. However in the 1990s, Moscow and Ankara were extremely cautious so as to prevent a spillover of their tension in the Caucasus to the rest of their bilateral relations, as tensions did not involve Russia and Turkey themselves so much, as the countries situated between them. The South Caucasus was doomed to repeat its history as a grey area for Russian – Turkish competition.

The historical reconciliation process between Turkey and Russia should generate the same degree of enthusiasm as did the French – German reconciliation process. The advanced many-faceted partnership that was promoted by the Russian and Turkish governments is based on the good understanding that progressively helped overcome a long history of continuous conflict between the two countries, full of negative images that amalgamated into a knot of suspicion, resentment, fear of each other, and a legacy of haunting minds.

² The 3+2 format includes the three Caucasian states – Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia – and Russia and Turkey.



The Turkish – Russian reconciliation process is all the more exciting since it involves civilian actors, business communities, and tourism. The Natural Gas Agreement signed in 1984 marked the beginning of a new era in Turkish – Russian commerce. This agreement includes an “off-set” clause that allows Turkey to partially pay for the imported gas with goods and services to be exported to Russia. This led to a remarkable increase in the trade of goods between the two countries and enabled the Turkish contracting companies to enter the Russian market. Business communities in both countries have been crucial in this transformation of relations: business leaders knew that mutual interdependence, woven by trade, would eliminate many of the remaining traces of enmity. In the mid-1990s, the Russian Federation became Turkey’s first economic partner among the former Soviet Republics. Turkey’s trade volume with Russia represents 90% of its exchanges with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region. The Russian market is a valuable outlet for the Anatolian small and medium enterprises not competitive enough to enter the EU market. Russia became Turkey's largest trading partner, with a total trade volume of about \$38 billion (bn) in 2008. The total value of projects undertaken by Turkish construction companies in Russia so far has topped \$30 bn, corresponding to about one-fourth of all projects carried out by Turkish contractors around the world.

Russia is Turkey's single largest supplier of natural gas which has been the biggest single item in Turkish – Russian trade since 1987, when Russia first began deliveries. The Blue Stream project, negotiated in December 1997, will increase the annual amount to 30 billion cubic metres (bcm) by 2010. Russian media estimate that total earnings from natural gas exports to Turkey will reach at least \$7 bn annually by 2020. During President Abdullah Gul’s visit to Moscow in February 2009, Russia and Turkey signed a 15-year energy contract worth \$60 bn. A contract of \$18-20 bn for the construction by Russia of four reactors for a nuclear plant in Turkey is under discussion. In 2007, it is estimated that 2.5 million Russian tourists visited Turkey. In fact, nowadays, Russian is fluently spoken in Turkey’s Aegean and Mediterranean seaside resorts.

The Caucasus Platform initiative has brought about a new development: for the first time, good Turkish – Russian understanding is used to resolve problems in the common geographic neighbourhood. Contrary to the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) that has always avoided such issues, it was stated that the CSCP will be orientated toward problem solving. This comes as an innovation in the bilateral relations. Turkey and Russia have the highest stake in stability and peace in the South Caucasus. Ensuring sustainable stability in the Caucasus region is the only relevant strategic concern for these two neighbouring states. This objective is progressively recognised as a key issue in Turkish – Russian bilateral relations. The Action Plan for Cooperation in Eurasia signed on 16 November 2001 by the foreign ministers of Russia and Turkey, Igor Ivanov and Ismail Cem, in New York during the UN General Assembly, created new room for cooperation. In the post 9/11 context, both countries expressed thereby their determination to carry their relations to a level of enhanced constructive partnership, extending to Eurasia and being based on the shared belief that dialogue and cooperation in Eurasia will positively contribute to bring about peaceful, just and lasting political solutions to disputes in the region.³ In accordance to the Eurasia Action Plan, a Russian – Turkish High-Level Joint Working Group (HLJWG) and a Caucasus Task Force were established, bringing together

³ “Rusya Federasyonu ile Türkiye Cumhuriyeti arasında Avrasya’da İşbirliği Eylem Planı (İkili İşbirliğinden Çok Boyutlu Ortaklığa),” http://www.turkey.mid.ru/relat_2_t.html.



high level officials from the Russian and Turkish ministries of foreign affairs.

In August 2008, in Istanbul, Minister Sergey Lavrov described the Caucasus Platform as “a mechanism for limiting the conflict potential of the region and increasing stability,” and added that “its chief value rests on common sense, because it assumes that the countries of the region should solve their own problems.”⁴ This statement should not be interpreted as the expression of the will to exclude outsiders, but as the necessity to activate insiders and hold them accountable to their words. The Joint Declaration signed by the presidents of Turkey and Russia in 13 February 2009 reads:

The Parties [Turkey and Russia], with the understanding that security and stability in the Eurasian geography is directly related with the stability in the South Caucasus region, agree on the necessity to take effective measures for resolving frozen conflicts that constitute potential destabilising elements in the South Caucasus. In this regard, the Parties consider the Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Platform, that was proposed by the Republic of Turkey as a constructive initiative that would be complementary to existing international mechanisms and that would help overcome lack of confidence that they observe that exists among the countries that are parties to the frozen conflicts.⁵

The war in August 2008 was a wake-up call for the countries of the region. Hopefully, this will lead to regional accountability. Countries of the region have started assessing the costs of the conflicts. Armenian Minister of Foreign Affairs Edward Nalbandian, speaking at the BSEC Secretariat in Istanbul, assessed the cost of the August war for Armenia: “...the events around South Ossetia have shown how fragile and vulnerable is our region, how weak and underdeveloped is its transport infrastructure and how important it is to have open borders,”⁶ he said. The crisis lasted less than a week but has caused humanitarian disaster and huge material losses – the losses of Armenia amounted to hundreds of millions of dollars. Mr. Nalbandian’s words were echoed in the statements delivered by the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ali Babacan, during his visit to Baky: “...we cannot leave the resolution of the problems to the next generation. The Nagorno-Karabakh problem is not only a problem for Azerbaijan but also for Turkey and the entire region.”⁷ Minister Babacan stated that the bilateral problems between Azerbaijan and Armenia, Russia and Georgia, Turkey and Armenia need to be resolved in order to maintain stability in the Caucasus region.

⁴ Press conference transcript of Sergey Lavrov, Istanbul, 2 September 2008, <http://www.turkey.mid.ru>

⁵ *Joint Declaration between the Republic of Turkey and the Russian Federation on Progress towards a New Stage in Relations and Further Deepening of Friendship and Multidimensional Partnership*, Moscow, 13 February 2009, http://www.mfa.gov.tr/joint-declaration-between-the-republic-of-turkey-and-the-russian-federation-on-progress-towards-a-new-stage-in-relations-and-further-deepening-of-friendship-and-multidimensional-partnership_-moscow_-13-february-2009.en.mfa

⁶ *Turkish Daily News*, 24 November 2008.

⁷ “Babacan: Nagorno-Karabagh Resolution Will Help Armenia – Turkey Relations”, *Zaman Today*, 2 December 2008.



Explicitly linking regional stability to conflict resolution is another innovation. The Caucasus Platform aims at developing a functional method of finding solutions to the problems within the region, and is based on the acknowledgment that tensions stem from a profound lack of confidence among the states of the region. It does not intend to become an alternative to any institution, mechanism or international organisation. It aims at facilitating communication and problem solving efforts by the countries of the region themselves – a basic and, at the same time, ambitious goal. Regional responsibility and sense of ownership from insiders have been crucially missing in the past.

The opening towards Armenia, that triggered a new momentum in the normalisation of Turkish – Armenian relations, has brought important credibility to the Caucasus Platform initiative. By channelling energy toward the normalisation of its relations with its neighbour, Turkey asserted its will to become a genuinely honest broker in the region. The normalisation of Turkish – Armenian relations is increasingly being perceived by both sides as a factor in strengthening regional peace and stability. Turkey's inability to normalise its relations with Armenia in the past had hindered the prospects of conflict resolution and development in the Caucasus, as well as cooperation and integration in the wider region. More specifically, the policy that Ankara was carrying on for the last 15 years failed to induce a positive shift in Armenia's stance on the Karabakh conflict. Turkey has stressed that the border will not be opened automatically as a result of a peace agreement between Armenia and Azerbaijan; it will depend on the development of the bilateral Turkish – Armenian relationship and the resolution of the genocide issue. It is precisely the existence of such a problem and Turkey's keen interest in resolving it that makes the establishment of diplomatic relations an utmost priority, providing both countries with a formal avenue to tackle the issue head-on. The opening of the border and the establishment of diplomatic relations would in fact make it possible to address the other dimensions of the conflict between Armenia and Turkey.

Surprisingly, this new momentum for the normalisation of Turkish – Armenian relations did not encounter open criticism in Baky. The settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the normalisation of Turkish – Armenian relations are described as two mutually reinforcing processes. The latest news came on 26 December 2008 from Hulusi Kilic, Turkey's Ambassador to Azerbaijan. At a press conference in Baky, he stated that diplomats from countries in the region have been holding talks to draw the draft agreement on the CSCP. Turkey wants the Nagorno-Karabakh issue to be solved peacefully: "Turkey has been waiting for the problem to be solved for 15 years. It does not have the patience to wait another 15 years..."⁸ The CSCP held its first meeting in the end of January in Istanbul. It was followed by a meeting between Prime Minister Erdogan and President Sarkissian in Davos – the seventh Turkish-Armenian high level meeting in the last four months – and President Gul's visit to Moscow, where he reiterated the importance of the adoption of the trilateral declaration on the need for the peaceful resolution of the Karabagh conflict signed by Armenia, Azerbaijan and Russia.

Turkey and Armenia are said to be on the verge of signing a protocol that predetermines a timetable for the normalisation of their relations. The protocol includes the establishment of diplomatic relations and the reopening of the borders. Expectations are high that the two governments will formalise and finalise an agreement conceptualising the process and

⁸ "Turkey to Bring Azerbaijan and Armenia Together in Early 2009", *Hurriyet DN Online*, 26 December 2008, <http://www.hurriyet.com.tr/english/world/10647415.asp?gid=244>



defining the mechanisms, which will ultimately lead to the reopening of the borders, restoring of diplomatic relations and setting up of commissions to look at disputes, including one on the tense history between the two nations.

The Caucasus, once a hub of communication, became a cul-de-sac with the breakdown of traditional transportation routes. The Caucasus region has historically suffered from being a grey area of confrontation in the managed rivalry between Turkey and Russia. Bridging Turkey with Russia through the Caucasus highlights the need to untie the Armenian – Turkish and Georgian – Russian knots that impede physical communication and fuel mistrust and fear. The amount of pragmatism existing in the region, if sustained by political processes, can make room for the development of cross-border cooperation. The cross-border regionalism that has flourished in the past two decades, beginning in the heartlands along the western border of Germany and taken new strides in the 1990s in response to the opening of the Iron Curtain, can potentially be applied to the Caucasian borderlands. The challenge ahead is to transform old frontiers into borders secured through trade and human interaction. Cross-border cooperation will become a revenge to geography and a triumph of peoples over history.



The International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS) was founded in 1998 as a non-profit organisation under Greek law. It has since fulfilled a dual function: on the one hand, it is an independent research and training institution focusing on the Black Sea region. On the other hand, it is a related body of the Organisation of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC) and in this capacity serves as its acknowledged think-tank. Thus the ICBSS is a uniquely positioned independent expert on the Black Sea area and its regional cooperation dynamics

The **ICBSS Policy Briefs** are policy oriented essays on topical issues pertaining to the Black Sea region. As part of the ICBSS' independent activities, the ICBSS Policy Briefs are prepared either by members of its own research staff or by externally commissioned experts. While all contributions are peer-reviewed in order to assure consistent high quality, the views expressed therein exclusively represent the authors. The ICBSS Policy Briefs are available for download in electronic version from the ICBSS' webpage under www.icbss.org.

© International Centre for Black Sea Studies 2009. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the International Centre for Black Sea Studies. The views expressed exclusively represent the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the ICBSS

ISSN 1791-6658

ISBN 978-960-6885-06-8

International Centre for Black Sea Studies (ICBSS)
4 Xenophontos Str., 10557 Athens, Greece
Tel: +30 210 322321 Fax: +30 210 324 2244
Email: icbss@icbss.org Website: www.icbss.org
Director General: Dr. Dimitrios Triantaphyllou